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THE TEACHING OF FRENCH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS.

EVER since the time of Montaigne, who learned Latin by what we would now call the "Natural Method," the question of teaching foreign languages has remained open and "Adhuc sub judice lis est." The great essayist tells us:

Mon père me donna en charge à un Allemand du tout ignorant de notre langue et très bien versé dans la latine. Cettuycy, qu'il avait fait venir exprez, et qui estoit bien chèrement gagé, m'avoit continuellement entre les bras. . . . C'est merveille du fruit que chacun y fait: mon père et ma mère y apprirent assez de latin pour l'entendre, et en acquirent à suffisance pour s'en servir à la nécessité, comme feirent aussi les domestiques qui estoient plus attachez à mon service.

Sure enough, this unsolved problem remained dormant for many years, but it sprang up again in the sixties, when Professor Henness opened his school in New Haven, and is still confronting us.

In our public high schools, out of a freshman class of one hundred, only 3 per cent. go to college.¹ The high-school teacher in planning his course of study must therefore consider it as an aim, not as a means to further progress. Given a four-year course in French, four periods of forty-five or fifty minutes a week—*i. e.*, about four hundred and seventy hours all told—with classes of from twenty five to forty pupils ranging in age from fourteen to twenty, the questions that present themselves are: What can be accomplished? How should the work be done? A general development of the pupil should primarily be the aim. One should try to develop him, not only mentally, but also physically. The senses—*viz.*, hearing, seeing, and a proper use of the vocal organs—as well as the silent faculties—*viz.*, intelligence, reasoning, and memory—should be taken into consideration. To develop the senses, correct pronunciation should be very much insisted upon. But how should pronunciation be

¹ Figures for 1900 furnished by the Bureau of Education, Washington. Since then this low percentage has still somewhat decreased.

taught? By phonetics, imitation, or consonance; *i. e.*, by a comparison of English and French vocal sounds?

Pronunciation.—In order to acquire a fairly good pronunciation a pupil must have the two following physical faculties: first, sensitiveness of the ear; second, flexibility of the vocal organs. If both or even one of these be missing, no matter how hard the teacher tries, no matter what method he uses, he never will attain any satisfactory result; it would be just as easy to try to show the different hues of the rainbow to a color-blind person.

Theoretically the phonetic method is well and good; but in practice, although it may do very well in college, it is absolutely unavailing in a high-school course, the main objection being the difficulty met with in mastering the phonetic notation. And to be frank, the writer has his doubts as to the real value of this science, inasmuch as some of the best phoneticians he has met were very deficient in the pronunciation of foreign languages; it was, indeed, a case of "*medice, cura te ipsum.*"

After all, imitation will probably give the most satisfactory results, if the sounds are methodically grouped. If, for instance, the many combinations giving the French nasal *an* are grouped together, and if the pupils are told that when one or even two consonants are found after the characteristic letters of the sound, they do not affect the pronunciation in the least, such a statement will greatly facilitate the pupil's work. It would also be a help to him should he be told how to use his vocal organs in order to produce the sound he wishes to utter. Consonance—and by this is meant the resemblance that exists between French and English sounds—may also be used to some advantage. Scientifically speaking, there is probably not a single sound found in the English language that is also found in French, but quite often they come near enough to one another to be indiscriminately used.

Acquiring a vocabulary.—To acquire a vocabulary much reading must be done, and, moreover, the reading matter ought to be changed at least every ten weeks. A class which at first finds it difficult to translate two pages of a text will easily take twice as much after three weeks, and at the end of the ten weeks will read the text without any recourse to the vocabulary. The reason

for this is obvious: the number of words used by every individual writer is not, as a rule, very large, exception being made, of course, for such writers as Balzac, Hugo, and Flaubert, who, by the way, are but seldom taken up in high school. In a short time the pupil, having unconsciously mastered the vocabulary used by the writer, can, therefore increase his vocabulary but little by continuing to read the same author. It is in consequence of the principle just explained that collections of short stories by different writers have proven useful in the class-room. Moreover, the frequent changing of reading matter keeps the student's interest awake—a point never to be overlooked in teaching. Great care should be taken that idiomatic English be used. It is very poor policy to translate good French into bad English, for the pupil gets into the habit of using ungrammatical language, and in time does not know whether he is speaking correctly or not.

Memorizing.—Memorizing prose passages is also useful, provided that a practical use be made of it either by using the memorized lines for a topic of conversation, or for translation from memory into idiomatic English. Memory work is only good as far as it helps in some other work, for, as Montaigne says: "Sçavoir par cœur n'est pas sçavoir; c'est tenir ce qu'on a donné en garde à sa mémoire."

Composition.—As a means of deeply impressing upon young minds the construction of a foreign tongue, nothing is better than translation from English into the language that is being studied. At the beginning of the work, sentences should be very easy, in order that the pupil may not have to contend with too many difficulties—a point seldom considered by the numerous composition books that are on the market. A good plan is to allow the pupils to exchange papers before the work is corrected in the class-room, each signing the paper he corrects. Sentences should be read in the foreign language only, and then spelled out. The teacher may then demand a fair copy of the work after the pupils' own papers have been returned to them.

Dictation.—This is one of the most useful exercises. It ought to be practiced once a week. There is nothing in the teaching

of French that produces quicker or better results. It trains the pupil's ear, and if grammatical explanations are clearly given while corrections are being made, it will go farther than any book in the teaching of grammar, especially if the blackboard is freely used. The dictations should not be taken from a book, but should be made up of the words met with in the Reader. The construction of the sentences should be changed, different verb-forms should be used, but not many new words should be introduced, especially in elementary classes, unless their meaning can be easily grasped, for dictating to pupils words which they cannot understand is much worse than no dictation at all.

Use of the foreign language in the class-room.—As far as possible, the foreign language should be used in the class-room. Professor H. C. G. von Jagemann says :

His [the pupil's] ultimate aim, to be sure, should be to understand and use the foreign language without the intervention of his own, *i. e.*, without translating.¹

Commenting on what he considers to be faulty methods of teaching German he adds :

Aside from the reading of the German text, and even that is not always done, the student hears and speaks nothing but English ; in other words, for about ten minutes out of possible fifty, he learns German, the remaining forty minutes he learns facts about German.

These remarks apply as well to French or Spanish.

Professor C. H. Grandgent in a paper read at a meeting of the Massachusetts Association of Classical and High-School Teachers, December, 1891, says :

There are at least four reasons why we should cultivate it [conversation] : in the first place, it satisfies a frequently expressed desire on the part of the public, and as the public supports the schools, its wishes should be heeded ; secondly, classes do not correctly appreciate what they read (especially if their text is either metrical in form or colloquial in style) unless they know how it sounds ; thirdly, the actual use of the foreign tongue invariably interests the pupils, giving them a sense of mastery that nothing else can bring ; and, lastly, exercises of this kind stimulate the teacher to more extended study and greater mental activity. I should say, therefore, to those instructors who have a practical command of the language they teach : Use it

¹ *Transactions of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. I, pp. 220 ff.

as much as possible in school, but do not waste time on it. If you have something to tell to the class, say it in the foreign tongue whenever you think you will be understood without long explanation or tiresome repetitions. Encourage the scholars to express themselves in the same language as soon and as often as they can. Always, and particularly at the outset, insist on the best pronunciation attainable. Begin, as a rule, with simple and not too numerous French or German sentences containing no new words, and decrease, month by month, the proportion of English spoken. You will find that during the last year the greater part of your instruction can be imparted in the language you are teaching.

Moreover, if the high-school course is an aim in itself, not a preparation for college, the pupils should be taught, as far as possible, a practical use of the language without leaving out the mental discipline that is thought by many to be the sole goal of modern-language teaching. A further object to be desired is, of course, an appreciation of French literature, but it must be admitted that to most high-school pupils the beauty of it remains a sealed book, even after four years of faithful and steady work. They are either unprepared or too immature to appreciate it.

From a practical point of view, what then can be accomplished in a four-year course? After many years of experience, it is the writer's opinion that results may be summed up as follows: 12 or 15 per cent. of the pupils succeed in writing and speaking the language fairly well, *i. e.*, well enough for practical use; as many more succeed in speaking and writing it after a fashion; 50 per cent. more understand it when not too rapidly spoken, but are unable either to speak or to write it with any degree of correctness; the rest have just been wasting their time and the teacher's energy.

Such a meager result, it may be objected, is hardly worth trying for. True enough, but are results any better in ancient languages, or in any branch of study? How many high-school pupils are able, when they get through their course, to write a Latin composition worth looking at? How many have mastered even the rudiments of geometry? How many could give a correct account of the most important events in Ancient, Greek, or Roman history? How many have learned to write their own language correctly? This comparative lack of good

results does not prove that more could have been accomplished by an exclusively translation method. On the contrary, it has been the writer's experience that of his students who entered college those who had learned to read aloud correctly, and to speak the language to a certain extent, stood higher than those who had used the translation method alone.

A further result of the use of French in the class-room is to quicken the thinking power of the pupils. When a pupil is required to answer in French, he has at the same moment to think of the construction, the agreement of words, and the pronunciation, as well as of what he wishes to say, and it is obvious that, in order to do all this, quick thinking is necessary. Moreover, the clearness and the precision of the French sentence give to his mind a training that is akin to that given by mathematics. "Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français" has remained true up to this day, and a mastery of spoken French does much toward enabling the pupil to express himself clearly in his own language.

Nor is this all. The use of the foreign language by the pupils develops in them that very important quality self-confidence. Indeed, one of the greatest difficulties a teacher has to overcome is the pupil's natural timidity, his fear of ridicule. It takes some time for him to conquer the bashfulness he feels in trying to express himself in French before his schoolmates and to brave the possible laughter that his deficient pronunciation may cause. But if a pupil can be made to stand before the class and read with complete self-control a paragraph or two; or, better still, if he can be made, not only to answer questions, but to ask them, much has been gained toward the general development, which is, above and before all, the aim of a high-school education, to say nothing of his increased knowledge of French. To reach such a result, a student must, at every minute, feel the encouraging influence of his teacher; a rapid glance, an expression of approval on the instructor's face, will do much to give him courage in a work that is really more arduous than most of us realize it to be.

And, last but not least, the use of the foreign language in the

class-room often awakens in young minds a desire for a further study of the language—a desire which never would have been awakened if only the dead side of the language had been shown to them. It is for many the starting-point to a thorough mastery of the language. How many times it has been my good fortune to meet army or navy officers, lawyers, even business men, who on meeting me long after leaving school were able to converse in French, and were so kind as to say that my compelling them to use the foreign language in the class-room had been the entering wedge, and that ever since they had delighted in the keeping up of the acquired foreign language, and in trying to grow more fluent in it by reading and by associating with persons who spoke it.

In conclusion, it may perhaps be said that the practical knowledge of a foreign tongue, although it may be far from perfect, is an attainment devoutly to be wished, because, as the German proverb says: “*So viele Sprachen jemand spricht, so oft ist er ein Mensch.*”

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